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ABSTRACT

The Austin, Texas,Independent School District's Department of Management Information has developed a set of guidelines for responding to requests for information about the schools, as well as requests for research subjects. Procedures for handling external requests have been grouped into five categories. (1) Research: applications must be approved by district research and evaluation staff before proceeding to the school principal. Applicants are encouraged to use annual achievement testing data rather than administering more tests, involve entire classes rather than removing individuals or groups, and select relevant topics. (2) Surveys from extant records: these are handled by the Information Services Committee. When appropriate, data are rearranged into the requested format. (3) University requirements, observation, and practice in administering tests: observation time must be requested and approved. Usually, applicants are encouraged to perform testing elsewhere. (4) School or class self-studies: teachers and principals are provided assistance by district staff. (5) Real estate selection: current data is not conveniently formatted for parents who want to live where their children will be bussed to the best public school. However, the District plans to publish a statistical profile report. (Appendices include the application for research study and classroom observation request). (GDC)

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84.41

MANAGING RESEARCH AND INFORMATION REQUESTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Glynn Ligon
Austin Independent School District, Austin, Texas

Public school systems respond to a constant parade of requests from those who want to know details about the schools and those who want to take advantage of a unique collection of subjects for research. The public schools must balance their obligation to respond to these requests with their obligation to protect staff and instructional time. All this must occur within the boundaries of open-records and confidentiality laws and must follow established research standards.

School systems must cooperate with those external persons and agencies who need information. Participating in research can be a mutually beneficial activity if improvements in the field of education result. Currently, some systems deny most requests from external sources, but the result may be mutually harmful. Some systems have no procedures and allow all external sources to go directly to the campuses or to central office staff. We have found that these personnel do not have the time to screen the large number of requests that go their way and that some straightforward guidelines and central screening can not only protect limited instructional and staff time, but also improve the quality of the information and research that result.

This paper is written from the perspective of a director of research and evaluation in an urban public school system. The system is located in a university area that not only attracts large numbers of research-oriented graduate students, but also produces education majors at one of the highest rates in the nation. Add to this the proximity of state governmental agencies that always select the hometown schools for piloting forms, reports, surveys, and tests. Then, add in a community that is intensely interested in the quality of individual schools as homes are selected within a complex, crosstown bussing plan. Together, this context places a constant demand on the public schools to make students, staff, and records available to researchers and the public.

How should a public school system respond to these requests? How can these requests be categorized, and what is the proper procedure for dealing with each category of requests? The Austin Independent School District (AISD), Austin, Texas, has developed guidelines and procedures based upon 12 years of

experience and numerous discussions with other school systems. External requests have been categorized into five areas with appropriate procedures developed for each.

1. Research
2. Surveys from Extant Records
3. Measurement Practice, Observations, University Course Assignments
4. School or Class Self-Studies
5. Real Estate Selection by Individuals and Realtors

This paper provides a framework upon which school systems can establish workable procedures for responding to external requests for research and information. Readers who work in public school systems and must manage requests for research and information will be able to judge their current procedures against those presented in this paper. The intent of this paper is to share our experience-based procedures that have allowed our school system to cope with a high frequency of external requests. School systems without formal procedures for managing information requests might benefit in terms of reduced instructional and staff time losses in addition to increased usefulness to the schools of research findings.

1. RESEARCH

University, private, and governmental agencies need children, especially public school youth, as subjects for their research. No other source of such a large, captive, carefully stratified, and available group of candidates exists outside the public schools. Research almost always demands special arrangements within the schools, i.e., comparison groups, special interventions, additional testing, etc. Research must also be handled most carefully to ensure protection of the subjects and adherence to accepted standards.

Management Procedure. Attachment A is a copy of AISD'S formal application for research. What is not evident in the application is the importance of a prior conference with the research and evaluation staff to clear up major hurdles to approval of a specific research application. For example, we currently advise prospective researchers to consider the advice given on the next page.

- avoid administering achievement tests by using data from our annual achievement testing,
- use data in our data bases rather than collecting new data,
- avoid the late spring when schools get too busy with required end-of-school activities,
- interact with students outside of instructional time,
- involve whole classes rather than pull out individuals or groups,
- avoid samples that must be recruited across a number of campuses,
- choose topics directly related to education in public schools,
- tie activities requiring instruction to current curriculum (i.e., coordinate a study of instructional modes in science to existing science lessons), and
- conduct studies related to the District's current information needs or pending decisions.

When an application is received, the review and approval procedure is as shown in Figure 1. Such a formal application and review process screens out many less serious research efforts, and contributes to a high acceptance rate by campus principals who have the final word on their schools' participation.

Figure 2 summarizes the number of formal research applications processed in the past three years. Keep in mind that a large number of potential researchers are discouraged or directed elsewhere in pre-appliation consultations. For comparison, in 1973-74, prior to this formal applicaton process, there were 74 research projects being conducted compared to 15, 23, and 11 in the past three years.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
Department of Management Information
Office of Research and Evaluation

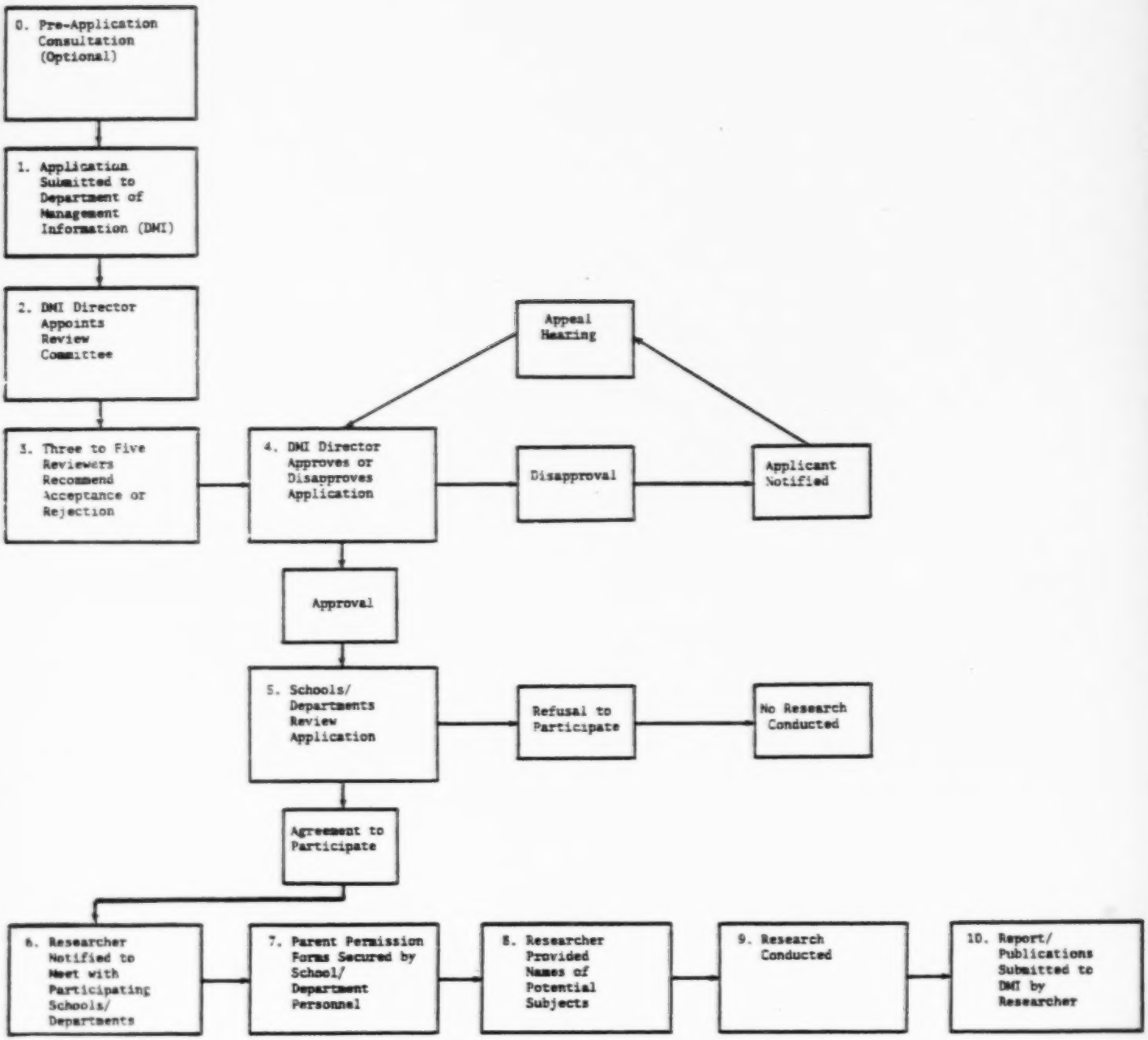
0. Pre-Application Consultation (Optional)
1. Application Submitted to Department of Management Information (DMI)
2. DMI Director Appoints Review Committee
3. Three to Five Reviewers Recommend Acceptance or Rejection
4. DMI Director Approves or Disapproves Application
Appeal Hearing
Disapproval
Applicant Notified
Approval
5. Schools/ Departments Review Application
Refusal to Participate
No Research Conducted
Agreement to Participate
6. Researcher Notified to Meet with Participating Schools/ Departments
7. Parent Permission Forms Secured by School/ Department Personnel
8. Researcher Provided Names of Potential Subjects
9. Research Conducted
10. Report/ Publications Submitted to DMI by Researcher

Figure 1. PROCEDURE FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN THE AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

	82-83	83-84	84-85
Research Applications	22	31	17
Approved	15	23	11
Disapproved	6	7	3
Postponed	1	0	0
Withdrawn	0	1	1
Pending	0	0	2

Figure 2. NUMBER OF RESEARCH APPLICATIONS RECEIVED, APPROVED, AND DISAPPROVED BY AISD; 1982-83 THROUGH 1984-85

2. SURVEYS FROM EXTANT RECORDS

Many information requests require no new data collection from original sources such as student testing, surveying, or records collection. However, few ask for data in the format it already exists; thus, staff are required to rearrange information into another person's format. Most of these requests are in the form of surveys of personnel, finance, enrollment, and curriculum status.

Management Procedure. AISD established an internal Information Services Committee two years ago to oversee and coordinate the information needs of the District. The assistant superintendents and directors of all departments that frequently collect or use data are on the committee. One of the functions of this committee is to review information requests, other than research applications. Our year-old procedure for responding to survey requests is to send all requests to the Department of Management Information (within which resides the Office of Research and Evaluation), where each is logged in and assigned to the appropriate person. If the information requested is on hand in an

acceptable format, the request is filled immediately rather than being assigned. Figure 3 summarizes the requests processed in the first 12-month period of operation.

REQUESTS RECEIVED	
Completed responses mailed:	87
Pending:	7
No Response:	16
Refused:	9
TOTAL:	119

Key:

- Completed
- Pending (deadline less than one month past)
- No Response (letter mailed to person who requested data)
  - (1) Nothing from AISD person (deadline more than one month past)
  - (2) AISD person/staff had no time for completion
  - (3) Information not available
  - (4) Not assigned
- Refused (decision made not to participate)

Figure 3. SUMMARY OF INFORMATION REQUESTS RECEIVED BY THE AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT FROM JANUARY 1, 1984 THROUGH DECEMBER 31, 1984

Although many governmental or other agency information requests (i.e., NIE, ERS, state education agencies) do require staff to collect some new data or to test students, these requests are most often handled as surveys from extant records as described in this section. If the extent of the data collection is large, then the request is considered a research project. In a few cases, a formal application is waived.

The advantages of this procedure for requests from extant records include the following.

- Each request receives some response even if it is merely to say no one can respond.
- A central file is available of all requests and the data provided. The expectation is that some future requests can be answered from the file rather than by a staff member. At the least, the District has a collection of the types of requests received and can plan future standard data collection and reporting to include frequently referenced data.
- The Information Services Committee reviews and determines whether certain requests should be processed or denied. Most requests are straightforward, but some require extensive effort or are irrelevant to the District. Rather than requests being judged by whoever opens the mail, some consistency in judgments is possible. This can place needed priority on politically sensitive requests or save staff time responding to insignificant requests.

The major disadvantage is that someone has to receive the requests, assign them, and follow up on each. Overall, the advantages are outweighing this disadvantage in AISD.

3. MEASUREMENT PRACTICE, OBSERVATIONS, UNIVERSITY COURSE REQUIREMENTS

University students seldom understand the need for any formal review procedure before they are allowed to "just observe" or practice giving IQ tests to a handful of students. University professors appear to give little consideration to how their students will accomplish the observation or testing assignments they receive.

Management Procedure. Our Office of Student Teaching and Staff Development screens all requests for classroom observations (see request form in Attachment B). If student testing is requested, the Department of Management Information must be contacted. Generally, these student testing requests are denied because of the loss of instructional time. Testing may be approved in a few circumstances, including when:

a. A formal research proposal is submitted and approved, or

b. The testing takes place within a classroom/school in which the tester already works as a student teacher and principal approval and parent permission are obtained.

Usually, the applicant is encouraged to seek subjects outside of the public schools.

4. SCHOOL OR CLASS SELF-STUDIES

Teachers and principals often want to try out a new idea or instructional arrangement within their own span of control. On the surface, this presents no problems; however, the time and effort may detract from required activities or contradict systemwide priorities.

Management Procedure. Teachers and principals are encouraged to inform the Assistant Superintendent for either Elementary or Secondary Education during the planning stage of any study. Persons are often referred to the Department of Management Information for technical assistance, and those persons are always encouraged to obtain parental permission prior to conducting their study.

5. REAL ESTATE SELECTION

These are the most frustrating requests, because they want a subjective assessment of which is the best school.

Management Procedure. Our District is currently a model of inefficiency (somewhat by design) in responding to real estate-related requests. Because of our extensive court-ordered bussing for desegregation plan, we consider our schools roughly equivalent and really would be hard pressed anyway to rank them

reliably. We do provide access to all District reports containing school data including achievement test results. However, these records are not formatted or printed for easy reproduction.

Our plan is to follow the lead of other districts and to publish a systemwide and campus statistical profile report. Through Division H of AERA, districts may submit their profiles for judging in an annual awards competition. The top entries for 1985 included school districts in Dade County, Florida; Montgomery County, Maryland; Rochester, New York; and Washington, D.C. Their profiles may serve as excellent models for others and us to follow.

Summary

The first step in managing information requests has to be identify and categorize those requests most frequently received by a school system. The second step should be to learn from others' failures and successes. This paper addresses both of these steps using the experiences of the Austin Independent School District's Department of Management Information as an experience base. Overall, our handling of information requests has improved because we have established some workable procedures for responding. The net effect is that somewhat fewer of the people requesting information actually get a positive reponse, but the majority who do, receive more useful responses more often than before, from the person who best knows the data.

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Application for Research Study

Date_____

Proposal Number_____
(Filled by AISD)

Project Starting Date _____

Project Ending Date _____

Director of Research Project:_____

Address:_____

Telephone Number:_____

Faculty or Staff Sponsor of Research Project:_____Phone No._____

University or Staff Department:_____

Title of Proposal:_____

_____

Ultimate Purpose of Study (Thesis, Publication in Journal?)_____

_____

Brief Description of Study:

Description of Anticipated Contribution to Theory or Field:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

How Will This Study Contribute To Student Education In The Austin Independent School District?

Hypotheses of the Study:

Brief Summary of Research Design Including Statistical Analysis Procedures:

List at Least the Three Most Prominent Research Studies, Articles, or Books Most Pertinent to the Field of this Research:

Source of Research Funds:

Is This a Single Study or One of a Series Planned or Contemplated?

Number and Description of Schools Required:

Number and Description of Children Required:

Time Required of Each Child:

Time Required of Classroom Teacher:

Time Required of Other Staff (Identify):

Extent of Parent Involvement:

Information Required from School Records:

List Equipment and Names of Tests to be Used (Attach description or copies of test instruments):

Does Any of the Equipment or Procedures to be Used Constitute a Potential Emotional or Physical Hazard to Subjects?

Yes_____ No_____
(Explain)

Facilities Needed:

Research Assistants:

Preferred Testing Days:

Special Conditions or Restrictions Regarding Subject Population:

Will There Be a Follow-up Study?

I understand that I am requesting assistance in a research project and I am not requesting information pursuant to the Texas Open Records Act. If my request for research assistance is granted, I agree to abide by all policies, rules, and regulations of the District.

Signed:_____
Director of Research Project

Sponsor: I have read the Policies and Procedures for Research in the Austin Independent School District by Outside Agencies or Individuals and understand that supervision of this project and responsibility for a report on its outcome rests with me. I also understand that the privilege of conducting future studies in the Austin Independent School District is conditioned upon the fulfillment of such obligations.

Signed:_____
Sponsor of Research Project

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
Office of Staff Development and Student Teaching
6100 Guadalupe Street
Austin, Texas 78752
541-8411

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION REQUEST

TO THE APPLICANT:

The professional personnel of the Austin Independent School District welcome your request for classroom observation experience in our school district. Because we participate so extensively with a wide variety of institutions in providing field experiences, we request that you observe the following guidelines so that your experience with us can be beneficial as well as enjoyable.

1. This form is used for requests from individuals only. Requests for experiences by a *group* or *class* will be handled on a different basis.

2. This request form is for classroom observation experiences *not* involving research, research projects, or any other formal data collection. Research projects in the District are coordinated by the Office of Research and Evaluation.

3. Please supply as much information as possible on the reverse side of this form so that we can try to meet your specific needs for classroom observation.

4. Please submit this form to the A.I.S.D. Office of Staff Development and Student Teaching (either by mail or in person) **at least two (2) weeks prior to your first requested date.** (Step I)

5. If approval is granted, one copy will be retained by the Office of Staff Development and Student Teaching; one copy will be sent to the school; one copy will be sent to the applicant. (Step II)

6. When approval is granted for observation in the District, the applicant should then contact the school principal to arrange for either an appointment or for the observation assignment. At this time the applicant may obtain the principal's approval signature on the request form. Final approval of this request is the responsibility of the principal. (Step III)

7. Whenever you report to the school for observations, please check in through the school office.

8. Please feel free to talk with the administrator of the school in which you are interested about our programs, organizations, opportunities, and specific concerns about your observation program.

9. We hope that you have a good experience with us. If you have suggestions for improvement, please feel free to discuss them with us. As a district we are committed to providing the best possible education for our students that our resources will permit. (Phone: 451-8411, Ext. 322)

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION REQUEST

ATTACHMENT B
(2 of 2 pages)

STEP I

Note to Applicant: Please read the reverse side of this form.

NAME _____ Date _____
Please Print

MAILING ADDRESS _____ Phone _____
Please Print

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY _____ COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR _____
Please Print Signature

Phone: _____

I have read the guidelines on the reverse side of this form and request the following Observation assignment:

SCHOOL/OFFICE PREFERRED _____

GRADE/LEVEL _____

FIELD/SUBJECT(s) _____

DAY(s)/DATE(s) PREFERRED _____ TIME(s) _____

Objective(s) and additional information:

_____ _____
Signature of Director/Supervisor of Field Experiences Signature of Applicant

---

STEP II

FOR DISTRICT USE _____ PRINCIPAL'S preliminary approval granted via phone on _____ by _____.

_____ Approval granted as requested Administrator Assigned _____

_____ Approval granted as changed Phone _____

_____ Request denied _____

Date _____ By _____
Signature of Coordinator of Staff Development and Student Teaching

---

STEP III

ASSIGNED: DAY/DATE/TIME(s)

1) _____ _____

2) _____ _____

DATE _____ ADMINISTRATOR APPROVAL _____
Signature